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ABSTRACT

A model program of cooperative school and family educational effort in teaching reading is discussed in this paper. Past efforts of schools to involve parents in reading programs are surveyed to reveal the following problems: programs tended to reflect the values of educators instead of parents; programs neglected planned formative and summative evaluation and communication skill development; they did not include provisions for varying parent competencies; they presented parents with lists of suggestions rather than involving parents in demonstrations, simulations, or role-playing for teaching reading concepts and methods; and they were presented to fathers and mothers to the exclusion of nonparent caretakers, part-time parents, or extended families. The program recommended here should be school-initiated and focus on four areas of development: gathering information (preprogram needs assessment through a parent opinion inventory, structured home interviews, or an assessment scale); establishing interpersonal communication goals to foster relationships among parents, students, and school personnel; training family volunteers; and selecting and implementing evaluation procedures. (AEA)

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Family Education in Reading: A School-Initiated Model

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Parent education in reading has been given sporadic treatment in the professional literature of the past two decades. On occasion, concerted efforts seem to be made to involve parents in the teaching-learning process at school. Impetus for these efforts are primarily generated from political activity, with the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 providing major influences in developing home and school linkages. Head Start and Follow Through require parent participation in guiding and implementing programs under the assumption that changes in child behavior necessitate modification of parent attitudes and actions.

As the pressures of accountability, minimum competency testing, and legislation for handicapped students pervade education, parents are increasingly exercising their right to be included in school decision-making. The time seems right for an advocacy approach to the role of the family in reading education, and as Ruddell suggests, the initiative for parent involvement in student learning rests clearly with the schools. (Ruddell, 1974).

Johnson and Kress (1970) have argued that, "If the school is to feel free to charge the parents if the product of the home is not a 'viable candidate' for success in school, it had better accept responsibility for helping to assure the success of the home environment. Further, it had better be sure that it is not faulty criteria for success in school rather than the candidate's faulty preparation which makes him not viable." When the family is participating in the school program, the opportunities for reinforcement of learning greatly increase. Parent interaction in the educational program yields the benefits of supportive home-school relationships, refinement of curricula with regard to community needs, and more effective use of teacher time and effort. What is needed now appears to be a framework for implementing a program which will give parents the information that they need and want and the training to assist in the school with confidence and competence. They also need the necessary human relations skills which will help them to communicate in a helpful manner with school personnel.

Past efforts in parent education in reading typically consisted of a series of workshops. Parents were given rudimentary information about the reading process and reading pedagogy. They were also instructed in making teaching games and packets and in such activities as learning how to read stories effectively. Frequently these programs were labeled with catchy acronyms , such as PEPPER, Parent Education Program to Pep-up Every Reader

(Duncan and Vonbehren, 1974); PEP, Parent Education Program (McWilliams and Cunningham, 1976); or PROP, Preschool Readiness Outreach Program.(Vukelich, 1978). Invariably the content and objectives for these programs were unilaterally determined by interested school personnel. A noteworthy exception was an adult education program in the Hamburg Central School System, Hamburg, New York , which was developed by Harrington (1970, 1971). In this program topics for class sessions were developed on the basis of initial discussions focusing on what parents would like to know about reading.

There have been some commendable efforts directed toward developing parent teaching skills. Swift (1970) reports positive results from a program for poverty mothers which sought to develop the communication skills of elaborated expression and improved observation . Mothers practiced story and language activities in small groups and were taught to observe child reactions at home. Feedback from children and mothers indicated that the insights gained from the program seemed to enhance the quality of the parent-child relationship. Other approaches to involvement in the home included such programs as Breiling's (1976) Reading at Home (for ten minutes daily), Mother Goose Morning (Engelhardt, 1970), Survival Reading for Parents and Children (Cassidy and Vukelich, 1978), and teaching packets and games made in workshops and tried out on the participant's own children the following week (Vukelich, 1978 and Duncan and Vonbehren, 1974).

Schools have launched a variety of creative programs for parents in addition to workshops. Book bank campaigns, "Be My Guest Day," tutoring, parent advisory boards, newsletters, handbooks, and parent resource rooms have been productive ways of including and involving parents in the curricula. A review of the description of home and school-based programs does reveal several of the following limitations which might be improved by more comprehensive planning:

1. The programs, although well meaning, tend to reflect the values of educators, not parents. Little evidence is presented to show that parent needs for information, involvement, and guidance have been assessed. It would seem to be of primary importance to a well developed parent education program that the school first attempt to find out what concerns parents have about reading, and how they feel about sharing in the education process. Assumptions of educators may not be accurate reflections.

2. Few programs incorporate planned formative and summative evaluation. Although subjective commentary provides useful feedback, it does not appear to measure adequately changes in behavior and attitude. Quantitative measures of variables , such as the number of hours spent in home reading projects or amounts of parent time spent in volunteer activities during the program duration, would seem to yield important evaluation data.

3. Few programs provide specific communication skill development which help parents, teachers , and children to interact in positive helpful ways.

4. Training for tutorial or aid tasks is well described in the literature; however, most descriptions of training programs do not include provisions for varying parent competencies. Many low-income parents are afraid to volunteer their services at school because they are are insecure about their own reading limitations. These parents need to be coaxed to participate by offering training for tasks that are meaningful but are geared for a level of success.

5. Workshop sessions are notorious for presenting parents with lists of suggestions to help their children. While these are worthwhile and well-intended, they are not as effective as demonstrations, simulations, and role-playing for teaching reading concepts and methods.

6. Nearly all programs are presented to fathers and mothers. This seems unrealistic in a society which includes non-parent caretakers, part-time parents, and extended families. A family approach to reading seems to be more appropriate. In a family-oriented program parents, siblings, and others can work together to create a total reading environment.

To accommodate these limitations a framework for a family education program is presented which outlines steps for implementation of a three-pronged educational thrust. Program goals focus on three areas of development:

information, interpersonal communication, and volunteer training. Goals and objectives in the three areas are identified specifically, but are developed through integrated approaches. The program begins with a thorough study of the community--its needs, values, and resources--and it continues with practical and comprehensive evaluation which permits realization of personal and group growth as well as new goal direction.

Pre-program Needs Assessment. Good family education in reading will respond to the needs of specific school population and community. Economic, demographic, geographic, and linguistic characteristics are considered in determining program structure. A study of school patrons includes a variety of types of observations which, when viewed together, reflect an accurate picture of community make-up. To obtain such information Duncan (1979) suggests the use of ethnographic research methods which permit a variety of instruments and techniques to be employed. Ethnographic methodology allows the use of global data collection through the use of opinion surveys or checklists. An opinion survey might follow the format of the Parent Opinion Inventory(1976) which assesses parent attitudes and compares results with comparable opinion surveys of students and teachers. Items on the POI are rated on a five-value scale and include such statements as:

"Our school is doing a good job of teaching children the basic skills."

__ Strongly Agree
__ Agree
__Disagree
__Strongly Disagree
__No Opinion

"Our teachers place the right amount of emphasis on developing critical thinking skills. (problem-solving, analyzing)."

__Strongly Agree
__Agree
__Disagree
__Strongly Disagree
__No Opinion

Open statements at the end of the inventory provide an opportunity for parents to respond in their own words; for example, "If you could change what is being taught at our school, what would you change?"

Another opportunity to assess family education needs in reading is through the use of the structured home interview. (Duncan, 1978). The interview is valuable when it is conducted by teachers, but it can be even more valuable when it is conducted by neutral observers, such as trained student interns or parent volunteers. The neutral observer has the advantage of being in a nonjudgmental position; therefore, the parent or parent-surrogate feels free to express feelings and opinions about the school program that he/she would be reluctant to share with school personnel. An added advantage of the outreach interview is that the trained observer can note other cultural characterisiics which impinge upon reading acquisition, such as amount of space available for study in the home or evidence of reading materials.

A third format for generating useful information might be an assessment scale used at the beginning of workshop or discussion sessions . Parents are asked to respond to the scale for the purposes of identifying common problems and concerns. Instructional planning for participants then develops from the prioritized issues which surface

through diacussions of scale items. The Adlerian behavior scales developed by McKay (1976) and Fears (1976) are good illustrations of this type of scale.

Simple logistical surveys are also important to determine suitable time for activities, requirements for child care, transportation needs, and available resources and talents. As information is collected and recorded, a profile of the community emerges which permits the school to plan a maximally effective long-range education program.

Information Goals. Information goals are defined as those which seek to give the family the information they want and some of which they are unaware but which the school feels is of importance. The school honestly explains the reading/language program as it relates to the following curricular concerns:

1. presents the overall picture: curriculum, materials, physical resources, time frames, grouping procedures, assessment, staffing, special services.
2. defines terms into meaning concepts for parents; for example , basal readers, phonics, levels, informal reading inventories, miscues, sustained silent reading.
3. shows the overall progression of skills.
4. explains how reading is integrated into the total curriculum.
5. gives explanation of tests and their uses. (types of tests, how and what the tests measure, the testing calendar, understandable interpretation of scores, some measurement terminology, predictability.
6. explains continuous progress reporting in a simple format.

The school also attempts to answer questions which are of concern to parents. Hendryson (1971) shares a sample

list of questions which parents commonly ask and which need interpretation. Included were such questions as:

*If these vital, early childhood experiences are so good for poor children, aren't they necessary for all children? And if so, how can we provide those experiences for all children in all neighborhoods?

*If I can't teach my child to learn to read before he goes to school, will he ever catch up with children who did learn early?

*How can I tell if my child is learning? If not, why not? What is dyslexia? Is someone testing to see if my child has it?

*What should I be doing at home to help my child learn to read? Is he getting enough phonics?

Meeting information goals is best accomplished by addressing priority needs first, by systematically scheduling instructional sessions, and by demonstrating rather than describing teaching techniques. Teachers and resource personnel should be careful to avoid information overload in presenting concepts. What is "old hat" to educators may be quite foreign to parents. Understandings about reading and the reading program are later reflected in better home-school relationships and in productive volunteer activity.

Interpersonal Communication Goals. These are defined as goals which foster helpful relationships among parents, students, and school personnel. Schools function more effectively when those involved have some knowledge of how best to engage in verbal interaction. Parents, teachers, and students benefit from instruction in the techniques of interviewing and communication. Among the

models found to be useful in developing these skills are those presented by Carkhuff (1976,1977) and Gordon (1970). These models identify the components of effective communication and include activities to improve listening, responding, and problem-solving as people talk together.

Quite often human relations skill development is overlooked in cognitively oriented programs. Experience demonstrates that when direct training in interpersonal communication is incorporated into an educational program, total learning growth is increased. Training in human relations skills improves a teacher's ability to set up visitation procedures that are encouraging. The teacher is also better able to define for volunteers their roles and duties, to be amenable to suggestions from parents, and to demonstrate techniques for parent and peer tutors. Three-way commitment is established when teachers, students, and parents are listening and responding positively to each other.

Training Family Volunteers. Everyone profits from volunteer service to the school. Volunteers develop a sense of belonging to the educational program and acquire skills themselves as they help others. The teacher gains time to use to meet individual instructional needs. Additional insights are gleaned as students interact with volunteers or peer tutors which aid the teacher in program planning.

The school mission is articulated positively to the community-at-large through the direct contacts with volunteers.

Ruddell (1974) suggests some excellent guidelines for implementing a volunteer training program. First, the teacher must examine his/her attitudes toward tutors and assistants by asking such questions as, "Do I feel comfortable with other people in the classroom? Am I willing to share with other people the roles of helper, leader, parent substitute, authority figure--the many functions I perform with children every day?" Secondly, the program should include the varieties of training necessary to utilize a range of volunteer competencies. Different tutoring and assistant roles are identified along with the corresponding skills required of the volunteers. Techniques of observation, reinforcement, and group organization are modified to accommodate pupil needs and volunteer competency. A third area of concern is the consideration of parent interest in assigning volunteer duties. Ruddell presents a resource letter which gives parents an opportunity to select from three categories of tasks and to designate convenient weekly times for volunteer duty. From this data a resource file is developed for future reference.

There are many good training guides for parent aids and for parent or peer tutors. One obvious area that has been neglected in family education in reading is the use of sibling tutors. Parents and teachers can use sibling resources to reinforce skill learning and to create good

home learning climates by teaching brothers and sisters to help each other. The format for peer tutoring suggested by Allen and Boraks (1977,1978) could easily by adapted to sibling home instruction. Story reading techniques and methods such as Hoskisson's (1974) assisted reading are formats easily adapted for use by upper elementary age students. Both tutor and tutee benefit from these experiences.

In training the volunteer tutor of any age instruction includes the following:

1. Identification of specific skills to be taught and provision for practice.
2. Cooperative planning with the teacher in carefully guided sequences.
3. Procedures for recording observations about the tutor as a follow-up to lessons.
4. Techniques for feedback, summarizing, and providing transition.
5. Understanding the tutoring session in relation to the total reading program.

Program Evaluation. School systems instituting family education programs in reading should include within the program design the procedures for evaluation. If the program is successful, evaluation will be a continuous process with periodic revision of objectives. As in pre-program assessment, summative evaluation is obtained through several measures--some as subjective as open-ended written commentary. Other

instruments for data collection might include the attitude and value inventories used in pre-program assessment as well as self-evaluation checklists which which give estimates of perceived growth. More obvious, but less useful data are obtained from student achievement records. As with other education innovations, it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between student achievement and parent participation in the school program. It is vital for schools to be sensitive to expanding interest and awareness on the part of parents toward the curriculum. Parents need to know that their efforts have been worthwhile and have been appreciated.

The successful family education program considers the observed and perceived needs of parents and teachers. It approaches reading education in a systematic, explicit manner and deals with both cognitive and affective concerns. Direct training of aids and volunteers is carefully structured and geared to the interests and competencies of those involved. Comprehensive and continuous evaluation permits the school and community to observe the results of parent efforts and to develop new reading education goals. The framework described is intended to eliminate "one-shot" and loosely organized programs which discourage parents from making a full commitment to the school.

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